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Not in My Home Land

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There was a small problem with my library account. I certainly returned a book a few days ago. However, my account shows that I am still holding the book. This was not the first time and was extremely annoying. I am the kind of person who cannot tolerate library fines, especially when it is groundless. I suspected that the book was not scanned properly when returned it. So, I went to the library to find that book myself. It was not at the designated location. After about half an hour combing through shelves, I finally found the book. It was in a large print section of the same category. Well, I should have confirmed the return status when I returned the book.

On my way out, I noticed that there was a presentation in one of the community rooms. The title was *Not in My Home Land* and the presenter was Wong Haff. I had no idea what it was about but felt curious and stepped in. I also thought that this might help me calm down. There were about a dozen people sitting in the room. I sat in the last row. Soon, Wong started to talk.

First, Wong introduced himself. According to him, he was kidnapped by the U.S. military from a small Asian country. He was mistaken for an international fugitive in hiding. After the military acknowledged the error, he was dumped on the street here. Since then, he continues to live as a homeless. Depending on the weather and other conditions, he sleeps in a park, under a bridge, at a shelter, etc. He eats whatever available. He comes to this library and uses various resources including the computer. Librarians seem to give him a lot of help. I was a little surprised that he now has a free email account. When he got his account, he was a little too optimistic. He thought that he could get in touch with his family at home via email. Unfortunately, this has not happened yet. He is still hoping that his family eventually gets the Internet access.

It is quite natural that he misses his home land. Once he tried to be "deported" back to his own country. But due to the lack of documentation (!), the State Department never initiated the process. Regardless of all these, he doesn't seem to be angry or bear a grudge. He seems to be accepting the reality and his new life. Today, he was asked to talk about his impression of living in this country.

"Friend took me to restaurant. Big meal. People leave main dish. Then, eat big dessert. Big deal. In my home land, no dessert. Only desert. Any way, we not leave food." Within the past few years, Wong learned the English language fairly well. I can understand him all right. But for the sake of clarity, I am going to re-tell the rest of his story.

After the introduction, Wong thanked the library for all the help. He also thanked a local gym for letting him use their shower room. But whenever he goes there, naturally on foot, he wonders. All these people come here by car and do some exercises on fancy machines. Wong has never used those machines. But he easily walks several miles (probably much more) every day. That's a pretty good exercise. He said he doesn't need to burn gas just to burn calories. In Wong's home land, people just walk. The only occasions people travel in a cart pulled by one or two gocheep (cross between the goat and the sheep) would be when they are seriously injured, sick, or dead.

On a related note, when Wong first saw a school bus, he was unable to comprehend why these perfectly healthy students need to be transported by a bus. Even when students are supposed to walk due to the proximity to their school, they often get ride from their parents. Wong wonders what good these parents are doing to their children. Aren't people in this country, young and old, suffering from lack of daily exercises? In his home land, all students walk to their school, often miles. That's part of the life there.

As for children, Wong was very surprised by the existence of child care businesses here. Actually, he was surprised by senior care businesses as well. It didn't come to his mind that these commonsensical activities become a "business," a source of money. It didn't make sense to him that these precious activities are measured in terms of lifeless money. In his home land, children and seniors are taken care of by their relatives and neighbors.

Then, Wong said he was really shocked to have learned of the existence of child abuse in this country. Why would adults do such a horrific thing? Is it somewhat related to the mentality of making child care a business? Isn't it a peculiarly Western phenomenon? This came to his mind after reading Charles Dickens' novels (although still quite a tough read for him). He noticed that adults there and then are rather cruel to children. On the other hand, in his home land, children are treasures (of course, not in a monetary sense). At the same time, they are not spoiled either. The children there absolutely need to support their family and themselves in every practical way.

Another aspect Wong was shocked was the extent of inequality. The sheer amount of the money earned by the super-rich did not sink in to his mind. It was clear even to him that these people are getting rich at the expense of the "ordinary" people. Why do ordinary people let the super-rich steal from them? Are ordinary people blind? By all means, people in Wong's home land are poor in terms of money. However, this kind of extreme inequality does not exist. People there would resist such an absurdity.

Although Wong had never seen the kind of complexity experienced in this country, he soon learned a lot about it. It became obvious to him that politics does not help the ordinary people. He wondered why so many ordinary people vote for super-rich and other egotistic figures. He also wondered why ordinary people are pursuing superficial, meaningless, and self-destructive life goals without realizing the consequences. He thinks that both education and parenting in this country are not helping either. Rather, they are misguiding the next generation en masse. It seems as if factory workers were educated so that they vote for the factory owner, for the sake of being able to buy the products they make. In Wong's home land, the situation is quite different. There is no way egotists can be chosen as leaders. The ordinary people there have a survival instinct against egotists. Even though there is no formal education there, children are getting decent training appropriate for them to become a responsible adults. Parents don't pressure their children to compete with other children. Children are simply guided to become a good citizen. And since the community is rather peaceful, children look forward to becoming part of it and contributing to it.

Finally, Wong mentioned his finding about the use of gestures. When he first saw the middle-finger gesture, he had absolutely no idea. Now, he knows what it means. His observation is that this kind of offensive gestures are used much more frequently than gestures associated with politeness, kindness, and/or respect. In fact, he wonders if there is any common gesture that is associated with respect. In his home land, there is no equivalent of the middle-finger gesture. The most common gesture is for respect and peacefulness. He showed that to us. It was something like this: hold open palms stacked together facing up in front of the abdomen and bow. The phrase that accompanies the gesture is *sashi ulek*. He explained that this gesture originated from the posture of holding a baby in front of the body.

Then, Wong compared this gesture with several others used in various parts of the world. First, this gesture is not at all like the common military salute. He thinks that the military salute is more strongly associated with obedience. Second, this gesture is different from martial art-style gestures. It isn't for fighting. Third, this gesture differs from the Japanese-style bow. It doesn't represent a hierarchy. Note that this gesture is routinely used even to children (reflecting its origin). Fourth, this gesture is not the same as the namaste hand gesture. It isn't of a religious origin.

Wong suspected that there be a connection between the use of gestures and the mindset of people. I had to agree with that. When Wong finished his talk, I realized that my frustration

with the library account had subsided. *Sashi ulek*.